

MEDIATION CYCLES IN NON-TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

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1. General aim & considerations

The main topic of investigation for this essay will be the mediation cycles which occur within the media ecology of non-traditional literature. This work will include my findings primarily from the fields of literary theory and textual analysis, drawing from pre-established writings of mainstream authors. I intend on cementing the bases of this text with a limited number of (what I believe to be) important contributors to the field, notably Katherine Hayles, Espen Aarseth, Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure and perhaps a few more. In the hopes of articulating a potent vocabulary for my own research, I will mainly contrast Aarseth's and Hayle's views on different types of literature, their role in the author/reader collapse and how mediation is created and perceived.

The core question underlying this investigation is twofold, and could be formulated as follows : how does reading a text ultimately change it, and how different is this change, if said text pertains to non-traditional literature? This formulation implies an active role on both the reader and the text's part, and contrasts assertions on the nature of different types of literature. I will also put forth and analyse the process which produces new meaning as reader and author come together to create singular matter: the resulting product of these two agents collapsing, the constructed 'third space'. This thought will be tackled further in the essay while authorship, control and mediation will also be addressed within the same context.

The fields of cyberliterature, literary theory and textual analysis are multidisciplinary to a degree such that makes their exploration impossible without considering the countless ramifications they incur into neighboring spheres. I will try to avoid delving too deep in these collateral subjects, and perhaps consider them as rich material for further writing. In a grander order of things, I am trying to consider this first incursion in the field as a strategic placement of what can hopefully become important building blocks for subsequent research. In other words, I hope to render this essay self-contained enough to stay relevant and interesting, yet tentative, open-ended and modular enough for successive extension.

2.1 Text, Cybertext, Technotext

Text

In his book *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth (1997, p.15) inquires about an "old question [posed] in a new context: what is a text?". He later answers his own question by stating "[it is] any object with the primary function to relay verbal information". In effect, it is then mentioned that "(1) a text cannot

operate independently of some material medium, and this influences its behavior (2) a text is not equal to the information it transmits” (Aarseth, 1997, p.62). Already, we can identify two important vectors from which Aarseth constructs his idea of a text. The first one, the physical presence, is the materiality of the object (ultimately, the medium) and the mediating effect it has on its behavior. Secondly, Aarseth states the discrepancy created by the text itself and the meaning a reader extracts, or constructs from it.

From this definition he later derives the terms *scripton* and *texton*, which seem to refer back to De Saussure’s concept of signs (signifier/signified). To him (Aarseth, 1997, p.62), these new terms denote “strings as they appear to readers and strings as they exists in the text” in such a way that a limited number of *textons* can generate an exponentially higher number of *scriptons*, using strategies specific to non-linear texts (which will be addressed later). In essence, this means that configurable parts can form an array of different wholes as they are shuffled about. Scriptons and textons maintain a necessary tension that could be likened to dichotomous pairings such as body/mind, artifact/idea or tool/meaning. Different modular pieces of literature (print and computer based) could be evoked to illustrate this duality, from the ancient *I Ching* (Book of Changes), to *Caligrammes* (Apollinaire) to the contemporary Tale Spin (Meehan).

I suspect Katherine Hayles would concur with Aarseth’s last formulation, as she vehemently defends texts’ materiality and argues for a reconciliation of representations and the technologies producing them: “books are more than encoded voices; they are also physical artifacts whose material properties offer potent resources for creating meaning” (Hayles, 2002, p.107). In her book *Writing Machines*, she challenges the traditional binary concepts of mind and body by calling for more attention to the production tools of textual production : “[...] to change the material artifact is it transform the context and circumstances for interacting with the words, which inevitably changes the meaning of the words as well” (Hayles, 2002, p.23). Her plea for greater attention to a text’s “embodiment” suggests a merge between concepts that have been traditionally separated, “media and materiality; science and literature; immersion in an imaginative realm and delight in the physical world” (p.16). In a way, she seems to be euphemistically paraphrasing Allucquere Rosanne Stone’s hypothesis of implosion between technology and nature : “What about [a being] who has learned to live in a world in which, rather than nature becoming technologized, technology is nature - in which the boundaries between subject and environment have collapsed? ” (Stone, 1991, p.446).

When one summons the memories of a novel previously read, rarely will we think of the physical construction of the book, it’s cover, or it’s appearance in our library. Usually, the plot, characters, or the representation of spaces we creatively constructed upon reading will spring up in our minds - the substance and imaginative worlds that were carefully crafted - by conferring sense to the

printed letters. This traditional, print-centric view reinforces the conception that text lives independently of a body, and exists as an immaterial conceptual ghost (at the exception of artist books, as pointed out by Hayles). But the binary split is shown under new light now, as electronic literature carves its way into mainstream culture alongside printed books. According to Hayles (2002, p.19), “we cannot afford to ignore material basis of literary production, if only because we have little hope of forging a robust and nuanced account of how literature is changing under the impact of information technologies without it”. This holds even more true as large chunks of printed literature are being digitized into bits of data, to be later displayed on a varied apparatus of screen-based machines. These machines often use complex and sophisticated pointing devices, touch-screens, sensors and other metaphorical strategies that invoke distinctive senses (and combinations thereof) than the ones usually needed to navigate a book. This changes irrevocably the way we interact with these texts, and the way we understand them. This important thought is what Hayles is trying to drive home in *Writing Machines*: once the context has changed, the meaning changes too.

Cybertext & Technotext

To capture the essence of these new forms of texts, Hayles will propose the term *technotexts* (which she likens to *hypertexts*) as “literary works that connect the technology that produces them with the work's verbal constructions” (Hayles, 2002, p.26) and identifies three of their main characteristics : they must contain multiple reading paths, chunked text and a some kind of linking mechanism (p.26). Interestingly enough, Aarseth emphasizes narrative in a more preponderant way by insisting on the “non-linear” and “multicursal” (Aarseth, 1997, p.41) properties of non-traditional texts. The salient term *cybertext* used throughout his book on ergodic literature denotes :

[...] the wide range of possible textualities seen as a typology of machines, as various kinds of literary communications systems where the functional differences among the mechanical parts play a defining role in determining the aesthetic process. (1997, p.22)

By mashing his original definition of *text* with Donna Haraway's cyborgian concept, a “hybrid of machine and organism [...], a condensed image of both imagination and material reality” (Haraway, 1991, p.150), we end up with the new term *cybertext*, a system which “contains some kind of feedback loop” (Aarseth, 1997, p.19). Once again, Aarseth takes special care in underlining the importance of the “mechanical parts” in shaping aesthetics of the cybertext - the inner workings, the functional gears that make it “work”.

If Aarseth is primarily concerned about cybertexts and the analysis of non-linear structures, Hayles

is busy defending materiality as a transport for meaning and creator of reflexive loops between imagined worlds and bodily interaction. Nonetheless, they share a common view that new strategies are necessary for dissecting contemporary cybertextual works, and that new media systems should shed new light on old media and the assumptions that clung to it for centuries. Aarseth goes on criticizing how traditional literary theory has become obsolete in the analysis of these new forms of texts, describing the problems of contemporary computer-generated poetics as “1) use of traditional literary genres and formats as the ideals of the new literature 2) uncritical use of traditional literary theory in the criticism of participatory literature.” (Aarseth, 2002, p.141). Clearly, cybertexts (Aarseth) and technotexts (Hayles) are fundamentally different from traditional printed literature, requiring fundamentally different approaches for their critical analysis.

Lastly, I would like to reiterate my intention to focus my research on the study of *cybertexts* and *technotexts* in the sense that Aarseth and Hayles consider them, as non-linear, self-looping, self-referential and self-reflective entities. I am also not interested in analyzing particular genres, or types of text in any exclusive manner for the time being. As Aarseth has shown in his graphical renderings of typology study, paper texts and electronic literature can co-exist perfectly together within the same typology (Aarseth, 1997, p.74), and I wish to channel my efforts on the latter rather than the former. In line with the aforementioned definitions, I will focus on texts read on digital devices (computer, phone, television, etc.). These texts can have taken form, been entirely constructed, or initiated in part on these same machines, but not necessarily. In most cases I suspect they will be, although it is not a prerequisite for them to be relevant to my study.

2.2 Mediation, Collapse, Authorship

Mediation & Authorship

An important, long-standing question in the history of literature has incessantly asked: how does reading a text change it? As printed text (and I mean here inscription by ink and paper, not necessarily books) has flooded the literary landscape for hundreds of years, theories could be generalized for this specific materiality or medium with a certain accuracy. When we consider cybertexts, especially ones read on digital devices, a new question is layered onto the old one : who is the reader, or rather, the readers? If a new layer of technological mediation is inserted between human reader and signifier (text), how does the meaning (signified) change? What is the difference between reading the news in paper form, and on a screen, and how does this difference affect the resulting constructed perception we have of it?

To start answering these questions, we must first acknowledge that electronic cybertexts have new properties which were not present before in printed texts. Not only has the physical artifact completely changed from paper-based materials to plastic, metal, silicone and so on, but so has the interface. To ensure we are on the same page (so to speak), I consider the term *interface* in accordance to Allucquere Rosanne Stone's definition, something that mediates the body and an associated "I". (Stone, 1991, p.445). This implies a particular conception of presence and space, where one can be physically present in front of a device, and their "I" completely elsewhere, far into what she calls "virtual systems". Indeed, the concept of an interface is therefore relevant for both physical and software-based metaphors of control, independently of their material structure. A child concept derived from this idea is navigation, which Aarseth suggests as being characteristic of cybertexts (1997, p.76). These are enclosed but not synonymous with interface, the electronic counterpart of the traditional paging system. Navigation being also typical of electronic literature, it is usually rich in its diversity, scale and open-endedness, allowing readers to explore a myriad of paths, generating narratives as they progress (or regress) through a text. Certainly, navigation also facilitates mediation through its physical, spatial and graphical qualities, influencing the reader in his choices with its distinct vocabulary of signs. This creates a whole new system of interaction based on form and aesthetics, an extra overlay of control for the reader to exploit.

As text is mediated by a digital device once, then remediated by the user again (as it is being read), a looping feedback system is created. In this regard, Hayles proposes useful insight, suggesting that the cycle of representation-simulation remediating media back and forth thus creates a looping implosion resulting from what Baudrillard called the *procession of simulacra* (Hayles, 2002, p.5). If De Saussure was right in saying that every *signified* will vary from person to person reading a text, it is then precisely this *constructed subjectivity*, this original formation resulting from the collaboration between text and reader which is caused by the mediation process. I am particularly interested in this "third space" where our body and mind, where thought and materiality collapse into a new dimension, a distinct fertile territory carrying potential for reconstructing identity, presence, subject and body, to name just a few.

Collapse

While reading electronic text on a computer, it could be assumed that a first 'collapse' occurs between the text and the computer, then a second between the computer and the reader, and perhaps also a third between the newly constructed meaning resulting from the first collapse and the same reader. This tentative schema of a text's tumbling between different initiators and receptors unveils an elaborate mechanism of overlapping mediations. I believe these simultaneous interactions and feedback loops affecting our perception of the work in real-time ultimately results

in what I referred to previously as *constructed subjectivity*. The personal intentions of the reader and multiple subjective dispositions (which I will not attempt to address here) that make up a unique contextual frame fosters this particular construction in a different way for each person. The looping process causes a merge between the text and the reader, with all mediation cycles contained in between. The autonomous simulation and production, if such a thing exists, resulting from the different mediation cycles is what I hope to be investigating in a later essay by coupling programming languages and natural language processing tools.

The collapsing process between author and reader is elegantly presented by Roland Barthes in his essay *From Work To Text* (1979), as he metaphorically compares reading a text to playing an instrument. He explains how practising an instrument *plays* music (or writes text), but while playing, the musician also *listens* (reading text). These two roles cannot be dissociated from each other, and eventually they come together in *sound*, which is unique to every individual. In his own words : “[...] the Text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least to lessen) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection into the work, but by linking the two together in a single signifying process” (Barthes, 1979). It is interesting to note here how Barthes clearly draws a line between projection and linking, the former creating a distance and the latter joining parts together.

This constant back and forth between signs, substance, materiality and thought creates a thick fog cloud around the common perception we have of an author. Traditionally the “father and the owner of his work” (Barthes, 1979), the author is now reconfigured and separated into numerous strands that include the reader, the interface and, if we adhere to Hayle’s viewpoint, the designer of the artifact. Traditionally known as the exclusive conveyors of a central message and holders of knowledge concerning the subject written on, authors have come to be diluted in cybertexts and technotexts, with each layer of mediation contributing to a final cumulative meaning. Of course, the author is still considered to be the principal initiator and directing voice in cybertexts and technotexts, but in these new forms of literature, he provides much more a context to work from than a particular given message. This context, or starting point, is then often expanded, distorted, inverted or recycled into something completely different each time the text is experienced. The constellation of strategies employed to transcend narrative linearity has greatly augmented the capacity for these texts to carry new significance and in the process, create a convoluted universe of overlapping, self-influencing, partial authors. Multi-authored texts, ephemeral literature and interpersonal interactions are just a few of the interesting cybertexts and technotexts which exist, precisely because they are “temporal and unreproducible” (Aarseth, 1997, p.91) due to their constant metamorphosis, and often undecipherable, unpredictable author(s).

3. Freud and the typewriter

So how can cybertexts and technotexts be relevant in the context of electronic literature coexisting with printed text?

I have always been fascinated by Nicholas Carr's tale about Freud, who under the agonizing pain of constant migraines, managed to infuse new life into his writings by adopting the typewriter. This allowed him to write with his eyes closed, avoiding the sharp headaches that crept up his spine. In fact, the tale made such an impression on me that I have since bought a typewriter, hoping to infuse new life into my own writings with a tool that imposed "deep thought", fostered "great concentration" and apparently focused my attention.

But it didn't work. Every time I attempted dumping streams of consciousness using the mechanical beast, I turned back to my computer and flipped the power button after just a few strokes.

At first I thought the heavy thumping sound was bothering me, but I feel like I'm really beginning to understand now : the typewriter is a linear tool of production. It cannot cut and paste, it cannot change its mind and delete, it cannot let me try inserting a bullet, then rewind a few steps back. It won't let me scroll up and down quickly, insert a link, replace all instances of a word with another, export it to a few different formats. Once the ink hits the paper, it's over. The typewriter exports in a single format, and cannot insert a link at all. I can cover mistakes with white corrector liquid, but the process is painful, tedious and simply annihilates any hope I had of deeply delving into any transcendental state of mind. The sheer impossibility to edit my texts, as a reader would do when reading them, is what I can't stand about this typewriter. It steers my writing, and forces me to extrude my thoughts of the present moment onto paper, and then never look back.

Perhaps this is what Barthes meant by "coming together in sound", I just feel like my typewriter doesn't listen to me.

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